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The making and shredding of secrets

A fellow in Westbrook, Maine, has set up a company called Confidential Destruction Inc. that shreds private papers for you, very privately. A couple of responsible-looking chaps in uniform show up at your door in a van, carrying an empty canvas bag. The "sensitive" papers, as they are known in the Confidential Destruction trade, are gently but firmly placed in the canvas bag, which is then locked. Confidential Destruction men are bonded — above suspicion, even as Maine men go — but you are invited to accompany your about-to-be-hush-hush papers and witness their impeccable shredding.

You will sleep that night as you have never slept before. The way the manager of the local McDonald's slept after Confidential Destruction shredded his oversupply of coupons for free hamburgers.

Will Confidential Destruction Inc. take its place beside, say, McDonald's as an American success story? Or is it just a passing novelty, like the roller discodrome? Who can say at this stage? But according to the Wall Street Journal, Ladd Heldenbrand, the Westbrook veterinarian who thought up Confidential Destruction Inc., has received about 140 inquiries from people all around the country who want to start franchises, including a retired CIA agent.

If one of the basic rules of business is to provide the consumer with a romantic role to play, Confidential Destruction Inc. deserves to succeed. We like the costumed guards, the Brinks-image van, the lock on the canvas bag — the whole sense of theater.

Let's begin by admitting what every service veteran, every government bureaucrat knows: most "confidential" papers are about as "sensitive" as a recipe for corned beef hash. On the whole, they consist of documents that would put a prying mind to sleep long before a "secret" could be recognized and — even more difficult — be understood.

The "top secret" paper exists primarily to make a "top secret" person — an aristocrat of information — out of anybody permitted access to it.

In a world being buried under information, classified papers are the equivalent of the exclusive club, and the shredding of those papers is the ultimate evidence of one's elitism.

Everybody dreams of producing papers so valuable that the Library of Congress would wish to place them in its archives, reverently, under glass.

The next best thing is to possess papers so "sensitive" that they must be shredded if civilization, as we know it, is not to be rocked to its foundations.

To throw a paper into the wastebasket is to demean it — to signal that it is common trash. And what does that make you? On the other hand, to send for guards, a van, and a canvas bag with a lock dignifies your litter, and yourself.

Immeasurable prestige is implied in the possession of papers that must not be allowed to fall into the Wrong Hands. The key word is "immeasurable." Once those documents pop into the canvas bag, nobody knows whether they record state secrets, self-incriminating memoirs, or a few dozen games of tic-tac-toe. At 15 to 20 cents a pound, who can go wrong?

Clearly, Confidential Destruction Inc. understands more than its business.

But beyond a catering to vanity, a ritual of privacy is also being practiced here. To have a secret — never mind what — that no credit-card computer or government data bank knows is a real achievement these days, and a gratifying proof of one's humanity.

All we know is that ever since we imagined the possibility of a Confidential Destruction branch in our neighborhood, we've been saving old electric bills and shopping lists, along with one or two slightly more thrilling bits of exotica to stuff a canvas bag. Don't bother to ask what. That's our little secret.